

# PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (Vulnerability)

An inspection of Avon and Somerset Constabulary



December 2015

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## Vulnerability in numbers



### Calls for assistance

Calls for assistance per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Avon and Somerset Constabulary

England and Wales

**588**

**350**

Domestic abuse calls for assistance per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Avon and Somerset Constabulary

England and Wales

**13.4**

**15.8**



### Crime

Crimes recorded per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Avon and Somerset Constabulary

England and Wales

**59.5**

**61.6**

Change in recorded crimes (excluding fraud) 12 months to 31 March 2015 against 12 months to 31 March 2014

Avon and Somerset Constabulary

England and Wales

**+1.2%**

**+2.2%**

Percentage of total crimes recorded (excluding fraud) as having a vulnerable victim 12 months to 31 March 2015

Avon and Somerset Constabulary

England and Wales

**24.0%**

**10.7%**

Percentage of total crimes recorded as domestic abuse 12 months to 31 March 2015

Avon and Somerset Constabulary

England and Wales

**10.2%**

**10.0%**

Change in domestic abuse recorded crime 12 months to 31 March 2015 against 12 months to 31 March 2014

Avon and Somerset Constabulary

England and Wales

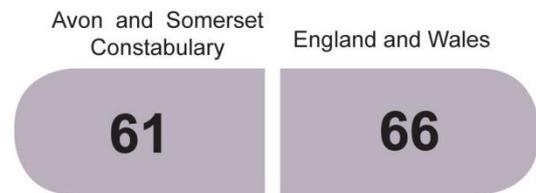
**+18.8%**

**+20.8%**



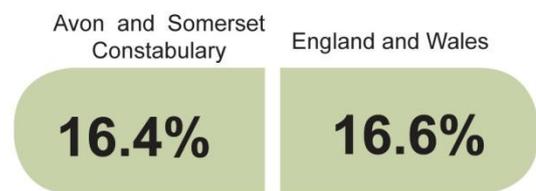
## Domestic abuse arrest rate

Number of domestic abuse arrests per 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded 12 months to 31 March 2015



## Charge rate

Charge rate as a percentage of all crimes recorded (excluding fraud) 12 months to 31 March 2015

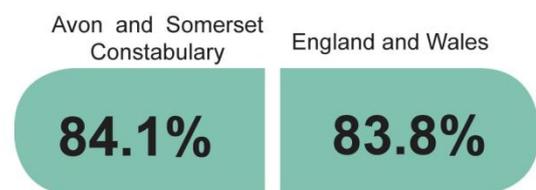


Domestic abuse charge rate as a percentage of all domestic abuse crimes recorded 12 months to 31 March 2015



## Victim satisfaction rate

Victim satisfaction rate 12 months to 31 March 2015



**Data:** for full details on the data used in this graphic see annex A in the vulnerability national report.

## Introduction

The public expects their local police force to support victims of crime by responding to calls for help, putting in place the right support and keeping them informed. It is particularly important that vulnerable people, whether or not they have been a victim of crime, are identified early and receive the support they need.

As part of its annual inspections into police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL), HMIC's effectiveness programme assessed how well forces keep people safe and reduce crime. Within this programme, HMIC's vulnerability inspection examined the overall question, 'How effective are forces at protecting from harm those who are vulnerable, and supporting victims?' We have considered in depth how forces respond to and support missing and absent children and victims of domestic abuse, and assessed how well prepared forces are to respond to and safeguard children at risk of sexual exploitation.

We have looked at four areas:

- How well does the force identify those who are vulnerable and assess their level of risk and need?
- How well does the force respond to vulnerable victims?
- How well does the subsequent police action and work with partners keep victims safe?
- How well does the force respond to and safeguard specific vulnerable groups (missing and absent children & victims of domestic abuse); and how well prepared is it to tackle child sexual exploitation?

At the heart of this inspection is the protection of people who are vulnerable. A force may therefore be judged as requiring improvement by HMIC where it exhibits shortcomings in one of these areas, even if its performance in other areas is strong, and even if there are many elements of its service that HMIC considers to be good.

This inspection follows up our 2014 domestic abuse inspection and reviews forces' progress on implementation of their action plans following that inspection. A national domestic abuse report summarising the findings across 43 forces is being published at the same time as this report.

During our inspection we collected data and plans from forces, conducted a review of case files and observed multi-agency meetings. We heard from victims of domestic abuse through a number of focus groups across England and Wales and conducted an online survey with practitioners, including Independent Domestic Violence Advocates, outreach and refuge workers, to gauge views on what has changed since the 2014 inspection and inform local practitioner focus groups.

During the in-force inspection, we interviewed chief officers in each force and held focus groups with officers, staff and partners, and made unannounced visits to police stations, force control rooms and specialist teams.

We also worked with the force missing person coordinator (or equivalent) to review cases of missing and absent children, including children considered to be 'repeat absent' and 'repeat missing' and children shown to be at risk of child sexual exploitation.

All forces are subject to significant cost reductions and these issues have been reflected in our efficiency reports published in October 2015. The judgments we are making in this vulnerability report are made understanding the financial challenges forces are facing.

This report sets out the findings from this wide-ranging inspection of Avon and Somerset Constabulary.

# How effective is the force at protecting from harm those who are vulnerable, and supporting victims?

## Summary



**Requires improvement**

Avon and Somerset Constabulary is clearly striving to prioritise resources towards areas of greatest threat, risk and harm and to provide maximum protection for vulnerable people. However, we found several areas where improvement is needed to ensure that the service is consistent and that vulnerable people are kept safe. Given the scale of the challenge in this area and the risk that is posed to some of the most vulnerable people overall, the force requires improvement.

HMIC acknowledges that the constabulary is committed to offering a high quality service to the people who are vulnerable and to support victims. The police and crime commissioner and the constabulary have made it a clear priority to tackle domestic and sexual abuse and have committed additional funding and resources to vulnerability. The constabulary now needs to build on this to ensure that it always identifies at an early stage the risk of harm to vulnerable people, and that it consistently gives victims a high-quality service.

The constabulary identifies and responds effectively to vulnerable victims and the innovative Lighthouse programme offers a significant opportunity for improvements in the provision of integrated victim care. While appropriately-trained staff investigate child protection and child sexual exploitation cases, high workloads are adversely affecting the regularity of risk assessments and action plan reviews. HMIC found that the constabulary is allocating some domestic abuse investigations, including those assessed as high risk, to non-specialist staff for investigation.

The constabulary has improved its response to missing and absent children. However there are areas where it can still improve, particularly in relation to the classification of children as absent, rather than missing. This could expose children to more risk of grooming for child sexual abuse. Effective partnership working to protect vulnerable people is in place, particularly within the multi-agency safeguarding hub in the Somerset policing area. Other policing areas are served by safeguarding coordination units where structures for partnership working are less well-developed.

The constabulary has made a good start in ensuring that it is well prepared to tackle child sexual exploitation, with a clear investment of resources into operations to investigate such offences. However, HMIC is concerned at the lack of consistent constabulary processes for staff to register child protection concerns.

This inspection only considered how well prepared the constabulary is to tackle child sexual exploitation.

Avon and Somerset Constabulary has a good range of policy and guidance to assist staff with the management of domestic abuse but HMIC is concerned at inconsistencies in a number of force processes for the recording of information on vulnerable people and the assessment of risk.

## **How well does the force identify those who are vulnerable and assess their level of risk and need?**

Avon and Somerset Constabulary strives to prioritise its resources on the basis of threat, risk and harm and has set its strategic priorities in relation to those who are most vulnerable. The police and crime commissioner's Avon and Somerset Police and Crime Plan 2015-17 includes a priority to tackle domestic and sexual abuse, particularly towards women and children. HMIC found evidence that the constabulary is focused on identifying those who are vulnerable and assessing their levels of risk.

To improve its understanding of the scale and nature of crimes against vulnerable victims, the constabulary uses a number of analytical products which include an annual strategic threat assessment. This assessment concentrates on offenders and victims of child sexual exploitation, so-called honour-based violence and anti-social behaviour and identifies locations in the force area most likely to contain repeat victims. The constabulary has also analysed specific crimes where the victims are particularly vulnerable, including domestic abuse and child sexual exploitation.

### **Identifying those who are vulnerable**

HMIC found evidence of good practice within the constabulary contact centre, with staff concentrating on vulnerability when responding to calls from the public. A call script template is provided to contact centre staff to ensure vulnerability questions are routinely asked of callers. HMIC reviewed a sample of calls during the inspection. We were impressed with the calm and reassuring communication style evident in nearly all the calls reviewed. It was clear that call-handlers readily and routinely use the call script and that they identify and respond properly to vulnerability.

Forces define vulnerability in different ways. The majority of forces use either the definition from the government's Code of Practice for Victims of Crime<sup>1</sup> or that referred to in ACPO guidance.<sup>2</sup> Nine forces use their own definition or a combination of these definitions.

Avon and Somerset uses the definition from VCOP and defines vulnerability as:

"You are eligible for enhanced entitlements under this Code as a vulnerable victim if:

- a) You are under 18 years of age at the time of the offence, or
- b) The quality of your evidence is likely to be affected because:
  - 1) You suffer from mental disorder within the meaning of the Mental Health Act 1983:
  - 2) You otherwise have a significant impairment of intelligence and social functioning; or
  - 3) You have a physical disability or are suffering from a physical disorder"

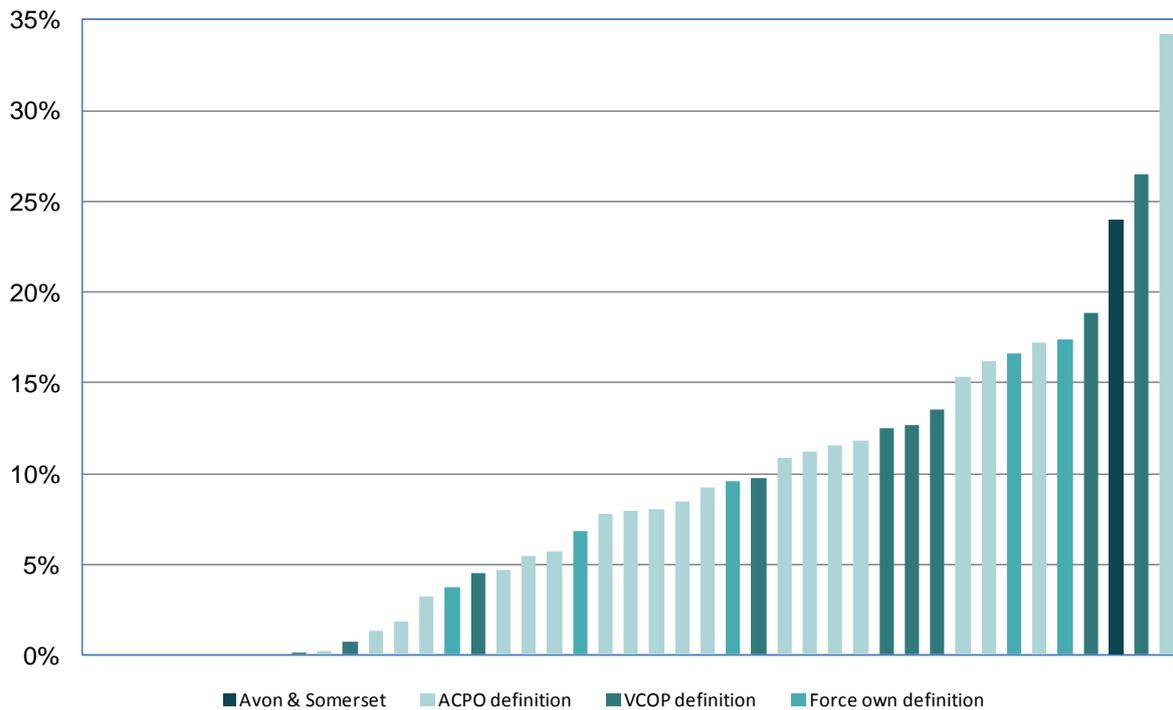
The proportion of crime recorded which involves a vulnerable victim varies considerably between forces, from 0.03 percent to 34.3 percent. For the 12 months to 31 March 2015, 24 percent of all recorded crimes in Avon and Somerset Constabulary were identified as involving a vulnerable victim. Eight forces were unable to provide this data at the time of data collection. There is no standard way in which forces are required to record on crime recording systems whether a victim is vulnerable and forces do this differently.

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<sup>1</sup> *Code of Practice for Victims of Crime*, Ministry of Justice, 2013. Available from [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/254459/code-of-practice-victims-of-crime.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254459/code-of-practice-victims-of-crime.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) is now the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). *ACPO Guidance on Safeguarding and Investigating the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults*, NPIA, 2012, is available from [www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/vulnerable-adults/](http://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/vulnerable-adults/)

**Figure 1: The proportion of police recorded crime with a vulnerable victim identified, by force, for the 12 months to 31 March 2015**



Source: HMIC data return

### Assessing levels of risk and need

Staff within the contact centre have access to constabulary IT systems which can identify previous contact by the caller and previous incidents reported to police. This includes over 22,000 vulnerability-based records that the constabulary migrated from its crime and intelligence IT system to its command and control IT system, so that contact centre staff have enhanced opportunities to link information in order to identify repeat or vulnerable callers.

Contact centre staff are also assisted by intelligence staff who work in the contact centre and carry out further in depth research on a 24-hour basis. We observed that call-handlers are routinely in contact with the contact centre intelligence staff, which assists with the effective identification of risk and provision of important and up-to-date information to officers attending incidents. The command and control IT system can be updated for staff to highlight, or flag, individuals who have been identified as vulnerable, such as those at risk of domestic abuse. However, we found evidence of low usage of the vulnerability flag on the command and control system, which means that vulnerable callers are not be readily identified as such at the time of further calls to police.

While it was clear that call-handlers routinely identify vulnerability and risk we found less consistency with call-handlers providing guidance to callers on initial safeguarding<sup>3</sup> and scene protection.

Police enquiry office staff are not required to use the vulnerability call script for persons attending police buildings. We found no evidence that these staff have received specific training on risk and vulnerability. Therefore, the constabulary may not identify the level of vulnerability for personal callers to the same level as those making telephone contact.

### **Understanding the risk to victims and ensuring they are protected and supported**

HMIC found that in Avon and Somerset the requirements of some vulnerable groups are better understood than others. The constabulary has a good understanding of the needs of people who are vulnerable because of domestic abuse, but it assesses risk inconsistently.

Avon and Somerset has a good understanding of risks relating to vulnerable people who are missing from home, and responds well to high risk cases. However, the constabulary needs to ensure that it categorises correctly persons as 'missing' rather than 'absent'. We also found that the constabulary is developing its understanding of child sexual exploitation and identifying potential, current and historic victims.

To provide the most appropriate support to vulnerable victims, the constabulary has invested more resource in the parts of its organisation which work to keep them safe. For example, the constabulary has brought together a range of victim support services under the Lighthouse programme to provide consistent and coordinated integrated victim care; invested in missing and absent coordinators to improve effectiveness and consistency in the assessment and management of missing and absent enquiries; and invested resources into operations to investigate and tackle child sexual exploitation.

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<sup>3</sup> The term safeguarding means providing protection and support to ensure the safety of vulnerable people and prevent further harm.

## How well does the force initially respond to vulnerable victims?<sup>4</sup>

### Response officers

HMIC found that response officers who respond to incidents involving vulnerable victims are supportive of those who need support and safeguarding. They are assisted in this through good availability of local safeguarding agencies, the contact numbers for which are stored in officers' personal radios.

Response officers are aware that they must complete a risk assessment at the scene of domestic abuse incidents. They are provided with a domestic abuse, stalking and harassment (DASH)<sup>5</sup> risk assessment aide-memoire to assist them in this process. Officers must record their risk assessment on the constabulary's crime and intelligence IT system after leaving the scene. They use their discretion as to whether they complete a formal DASH record or record the risk level on the basis of personal professional judgement using the DASH criteria. HMIC found evidence to confirm that both processes are currently taking place. However, we also found evidence that some required risk assessments are not recorded in any form.

Where response officers have recorded a domestic abuse risk assessment on the crime and intelligence IT system based on professional judgement, rather than through the more formal DASH risk assessment process, staff in the Lighthouse programme must then record a DASH risk assessment on the IT system in order to deploy any necessary further safeguarding measures. This inconsistency in assessment raises the risk that some higher-risk victims may not be appropriately prioritised.

Not all staff had received specific training in identifying levels of risk and vulnerability, with the result that there were inconsistencies in these assessments. We found that monthly rostered training days for operational staff are routinely cancelled to assist with staff shortages, and that investigative staff routinely withdraw themselves from training days due to high case loads and operational commitments.

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<sup>4</sup> The question within the PEEL inspection methodology asks "How well does the force respond to vulnerable victims?" HMIC has amended the heading in this report to make it clear to the reader that this section focuses on the initial police response to vulnerable victims, rather than the overall police response to vulnerable victims.

<sup>5</sup> Most forces use the domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and honour-based violence risk identification, assessment and management model (DASH): [www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/risk-and-vulnerability/#approaches-to-risk-assessment](http://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/risk-and-vulnerability/#approaches-to-risk-assessment)

## **Supervision of the response to vulnerable victims**

The constabulary's supervision and management of incidents involving vulnerable victims starts within the contact centre where an inspector, known as the force incident manager (FIM), looks at a number of cases including all those involving missing children and domestic abuse. The FIM checks the intelligence background around the victim, offender and addresses, making his or her own assessment of risk and ensuring that an appropriate response is provided. However, HMIC found little evidence of supervisor involvement in providing guidance and intervention for response officers attending reports of domestic abuse, or in the subsequent completion and submission of risk assessments.

The constabulary holds daily meetings that focus on risk and vulnerability. A daily 'pacesetter' meeting, led by one of the chief officers, contains a 'most vulnerable victims' standing agenda item, where high-risk enquiries are reviewed and developed. We observed a meeting during the inspection and found that concerted action to detain high-risk perpetrators and to protect vulnerable victims was clearly evident.

Senior officers lead daily management meetings across the constabulary area, which are similarly well-structured, with an emphasis on vulnerability. However, we found evidence of delays in information from the meetings being updated to the constabulary's iTask briefing system. Staff within policing areas who are not physically present at the daily management meetings have no opportunity to contribute and therefore may not routinely be in possession of all up-to-date information.

The constabulary has formed a vulnerability coordination group recently, chaired by the deputy chief constable. This should provide the constabulary with opportunities for improved strategic leadership and coordination for vulnerability issues across all of the constabulary's business areas.

## **How well does the force investigate offences involving vulnerable victims and work with partners to keep victims safe?<sup>6</sup>**

### **Investigation of crimes involving vulnerable people**

HMIC reviewed a sample of investigations<sup>7</sup> which were identified as involving a vulnerable person. We found that generally the constabulary was good at identifying vulnerability. Where vulnerability was identified it was dealt with well in most cases, with clear safeguarding activity.

We found evidence of good investigation planning for cases involving child protection and similar evidence of effective supervisory intervention, although such activity was not always timely. However, for other cases involving vulnerable victims we found that the constabulary recorded investigation and safeguarding plans inconsistently on its crime and intelligence IT system, and there was limited evidence of effective supervisory activity being recorded. We also found some supervisor entries which were short and imprecise. The disabling of automatic supervisor update prompts on the crime and intelligence IT system may be a contributory factor.

The constabulary has recently changed how it provides policing services. HMIC is concerned at the impact of this on those specialist staff who investigate cases involving vulnerable victims assessed as high risk. The force has recently undergone a preference exercise, whereby it allowed a significant number of experienced child protection specialists to move to other non-specialist roles within the constabulary. This factor, coupled with the number of staff leaving the constabulary on retirement, as well as the transfer of others due to welfare or performance concerns, has led to a rapid and marked decline in expertise and experience. During our inspection, we noted a considerable strain on specialist resources. Child protection and child sexual exploitation cases are allocated to appropriately-trained staff, but some have workloads so large that regular risk assessment and action plan review are not possible.

HMIC found that some domestic abuse investigations, including those assessed as high risk, are being allocated to non-specialist staff. A new influx of supervisors into specialist roles, many without previous specialist experience, has left investigative

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<sup>6</sup> The question within the PEEL inspection methodology asks “How well does the subsequent police action and work with partners keep victims safe?” HMIC has amended the heading in this report to make it clear to the reader that this section focuses on the investigation of offences involving vulnerable victims, rather than the police’s initial response to vulnerable victims.

<sup>7</sup> HMIC reviewed a sample of rape, burglary, offences of serious violence and actual bodily harm cases. In most forces the review consisted of 10 cases from each crime category but in some larger forces the sample was increased to 15. The file review was designed to provide a broad overview of the identification vulnerability and the effectiveness of the investigation.

and safeguarding staff with limited opportunities for advice and direction. There is an increased likelihood, therefore, that decisions on risk and safeguarding are being taken by staff with lower levels of training or experience. A backlog in training and development courses compounds the issue.

The constabulary is aware of the current pressures on specialist investigation. It has put in place some contingencies, including recruiting three retired officers with experience of specialist investigations to provide coaching and mentoring support for less-experienced specialist staff.

HMIC did find evidence of strong practice and procedure regarding the management of anti-social behaviour. It was clear that staff within neighbourhood teams regard anti-social behaviour as a priority, particularly when it affects repeat victims or vulnerable people. Neighbourhood staff we spoke to during our inspection demonstrated a commitment to managing and reducing antisocial behaviour. This was supported by thorough and up-to-date plans, accessible through the crime and intelligence IT system, across a range of cases. We were pleased to see that regular supervisory intervention is evident on plans, including up to chief inspector level. Representatives from partner agencies commented favourably on the positive multi-agency approach to tackling antisocial behaviour.

### **Compliance with the code of practice for victims of crime**

All police constabularies have a statutory duty to comply with the code of practice for victims of crime, which sets out the service victims of crime can expect from all parts of the criminal justice system. The code states that all victims of crime should be able to make a personal statement, which they can use to explain how the crime has affected them. However, HMIC found that not all victims in Avon and Somerset are offered this opportunity at the appropriate time. As a result, vulnerable victims are routinely being asked if they wish to provide victim personal statements immediately prior to court appearances, when their recollections of feelings and emotions they had at the time of the incident may be less clear.

The constabulary has brought together a range of victim support services under the Lighthouse programme at three bases across the constabulary area. Lighthouse has been introduced to provide consistent and coordinated integrated victim care throughout the life cycle of cases involving vulnerable people, and represents a major national innovation for victim services. A standardised protocol, based on the assessed risk of the victim, assists with consistency and timeliness of common needs assessments and contact with vulnerable victims.

Lighthouse is being challenged by a significantly higher demand on services than initially anticipated, and we are concerned that the constabulary is unable to provide the level and quality of service that it would like. There are inevitable resource pressures within the Lighthouse programme which means that staff cannot always ensure early telephone contact with each victim.

Victims should be kept updated about the progress of their case and, with the exception of cases within the Lighthouse programme, the recording of victim contact is poor in Avon and Somerset Constabulary. We reviewed 13 domestic abuse cases, seven of which did not contain documented evidence that the victim had been updated on the outcome of the case.

### **Working with partners**

The constabulary has some established and some developing partnership arrangements for vulnerability. Partner agency representatives we spoke to commented favourably regarding the increased emphasis the constabulary has on prioritising risk and vulnerability. A recently-introduced overarching information-sharing agreement has improved the information exchange for both risk and vulnerability across the constabulary area.

HMIC found evidence of effective partnership arrangements for vulnerability in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)<sup>8</sup> within the Somerset policing area. The grouping together of police and partner agencies has enabled closer and more effective working, risk assessment and safeguarding arrangements. However, this is the only policing area in the constabulary with a fully-integrated MASH. Other policing areas are served by safeguarding coordination units (SCUs) where structures for partnership working are in place, but are less well-developed.

HMIC found that some SCUs experience challenges in achieving fully-effective communication, information-sharing and joint working. In one policing area we identified low attendance at safeguarding strategy meetings. In another we identified evidence of inconsistent communication on achieving best evidence (ABE) interviews, a process commonly used to interview vulnerable victims and witnesses. We also found significant backlogs in the assessment of referrals within one SCU visited during the inspection. This poses a risk to children and vulnerable adults and reduces the prospect of Avon and Somerset Constabulary implementing safeguarding actions in a timely manner.

We found clearly that police and partner agencies recognise the logistical and geographical challenges to improving current arrangements, but both are very keen for formal MASH arrangements to be established across the whole constabulary area.

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<sup>8</sup> A multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) brings together into a single location key safeguarding agencies to better identify risks to children (and in some areas, vulnerable adults), and improve decision-making, interventions, and outcomes. The MASH enables the multi-agency team to share all appropriate information in a secure environment, and ensure that the most appropriate response is provided to effectively safeguard and protect the individual.

## **How well does the force respond to and safeguard specific vulnerable groups (missing and absent & victims of domestic abuse), and how well prepared is it to tackle child sexual exploitation?**

The first three questions have explained how the constabulary identifies those that are vulnerable, the response that is provided to them and what action the constabulary takes with partners to investigate crimes and to work with partners to keep them safe. This question looks specifically at how the constabulary deals with three specific areas of vulnerability: domestic abuse, missing and absent children and its preparedness to deal with child sexual exploitation.

### **Missing and absent children**

The constabulary has improved its response to missing and absent children and while that response is good there are areas where it can still improve, in particular in relation to the classification of children as 'absent' rather than 'missing'.

A person is classified as 'absent' if they are not where they are expected to be but they are not considered to be at risk. Whereas, if they are 'missing' the police are obliged to take steps to locate them, as the level of perceived risk is higher.

The constabulary conducted a missing and absent audit in November and December 2014 which led to changes in procedures. One example was to make the FIM on duty within the contact centre responsible for the assessment of whether a case should be classified as missing or absent. This arrangement was implemented by the constabulary in recognition of an increase in enquiries being classified as absent.

The introduction of missing and absent coordinators has provided the constabulary with opportunities to improve effectiveness and consistency in its assessment and management of missing and absent enquiries. Representatives from partner agencies to whom we spoke to during the inspection commented favourably on the role of the coordinator, particularly in respect of improved analysis and communication. However, HMIC has concerns regarding the high demand on post holders, which can lead to delays in the timeliness of information sharing and subsequent delays in safeguarding assessments, particularly where a coordinator operates across more than one policing area. HMIC also identified low levels of follow-up on extra actions placed by coordinators on missing and absent enquiries.

HMIC reviewed a number of missing and absent cases during the inspection. We found some good examples of risk assessment, supervision and investigation. We also found evidence of positive use of information-sharing with partners and the effective use of strategy meetings to agree actions in relation to repeat missing children. The constabulary crime and intelligence IT system is used to manage missing persons and record risk assessments, actions and supervision, but not all information, strategy meetings or significant activity is being recorded.

We are concerned at the way the constabulary uses the classification of 'absent' rather than 'missing'. The review found a number of cases where the use of this classification was inappropriate and potentially exposed the child to the risk of grooming for child exploitation. The constabulary has recognised that it still has work to do in relation to the culture of some operational supervisors and their lack of understanding of the risks posed by child sexual exploitation. Our inspection findings support this. We found evidence that some operational staff and supervisors regard repeat missing children as a distraction from other duties and do not appreciate the need to consider the risk and the necessity to take safeguarding action.

The constabulary engages with those who have been missing from home and seeks feedback from them to ensure that they are safe and well. Partner agencies then complete missing from home return interviews after the initial police 'safe and well' visit. HMIC identified that 'return to home' and 'safe and well' visits could be better coordinated to maximise intelligence and safeguarding opportunities.

### **Preparedness to tackle child sexual exploitation**

The constabulary has made a good start in ensuring that it is well prepared to tackle child sexual exploitation, although we found some risks and inconsistencies. This inspection has focused on actions and activities the constabulary has taken to understand and identify the extent to which children are at risk of child sexual exploitation and the policies, practices and procedures it is putting in place to tackle this. It did not test the quality of how the constabulary conducted these complex investigations with other agencies, such as children's services, as these issues are covered in HMIC's rolling programme of child protection inspections.

The constabulary has made its response to child sexual exploitation a priority. Child sexual exploitation is a focus of the constabulary annual strategic threat assessment. A number of analytical products draw on information from other organisations, including troubled families data and the 'Bristol Barnardo's against Sexual Exploitation' (BASE) data, to improve the understanding of the scale and nature of the risk to vulnerable victims. The investment of resources into operations to investigate such offences is evident across the constabulary, with resources being allocated to a number of investigations. For example, Operation Brooke was cited by staff and partners as a good benchmark with partners being especially positive about their inclusion in joint communications and planning.

All policing and local authority areas have a multi-agency partnership group to consider cases where children are at risk of child sexual exploitation. These are still developing but the constabulary's commitment to joint working is positive.

HMIC found evidence of poor understanding among operational staff and supervisors of intelligence on child sexual exploitation or knowledge of the early signs to indicate risk.

While we found evidence of trigger or response plans for some missing and absent cases where there was an identified risk of child sexual exploitation, we are concerned that such plans are rarely up-to-date and are held on local non-networked systems, which means that not all staff can access them.

HMIC found evidence of inconsistent practice in the way in which staff register and record concerns in relation to child protection. The constabulary has no structured process in place, meaning that staff have a discretion whether to record concerns, and use a range of methods to submit such reports.

Staff may register concern through a variety of constabulary IT systems, such as submission of an intelligence record, which would be first reviewed by an intelligence assessor, or by direct input onto the crime and intelligence IT system, which would be forwarded to the relevant MASH or SCU. This practice could lead to inconsistency in the assessment of risk and in the timeliness of safeguarding arrangements.

### **Domestic abuse**

In March 2014 HMIC published the results of its inspection of 43 forces on the effectiveness of the police approach to domestic abuse, with a focus on outcomes for victims and whether risks to victims are adequately managed. This included clear recommendations for each force about improvements it should make. The report found that while tackling domestic abuse is a priority for Avon and Somerset Constabulary, there were some risks and inconsistencies. The force is addressing the six recommendations made in the report.

The assessment of risk is used to determine subsequent safeguarding activity and HMIC is concerned that the discretionary use of formal DASH risk assessments on the crime and intelligence IT system increases the chance of inconsistency in the support and safeguarding that victims receive. The variance in domestic abuse risk assessments also presents challenges for Lighthouse staff in applying consistency and proportionality in respect of common needs assessments for vulnerable victims.

HMIC identified some inconsistency between risk assessments conducted by staff working within the Lighthouse programme when compared to assessments conducted by staff working within the SCUs. For example, we found that previous offending and referrals to multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs)<sup>9</sup> are not always being considered in Lighthouse risk assessments and safeguarding plans.

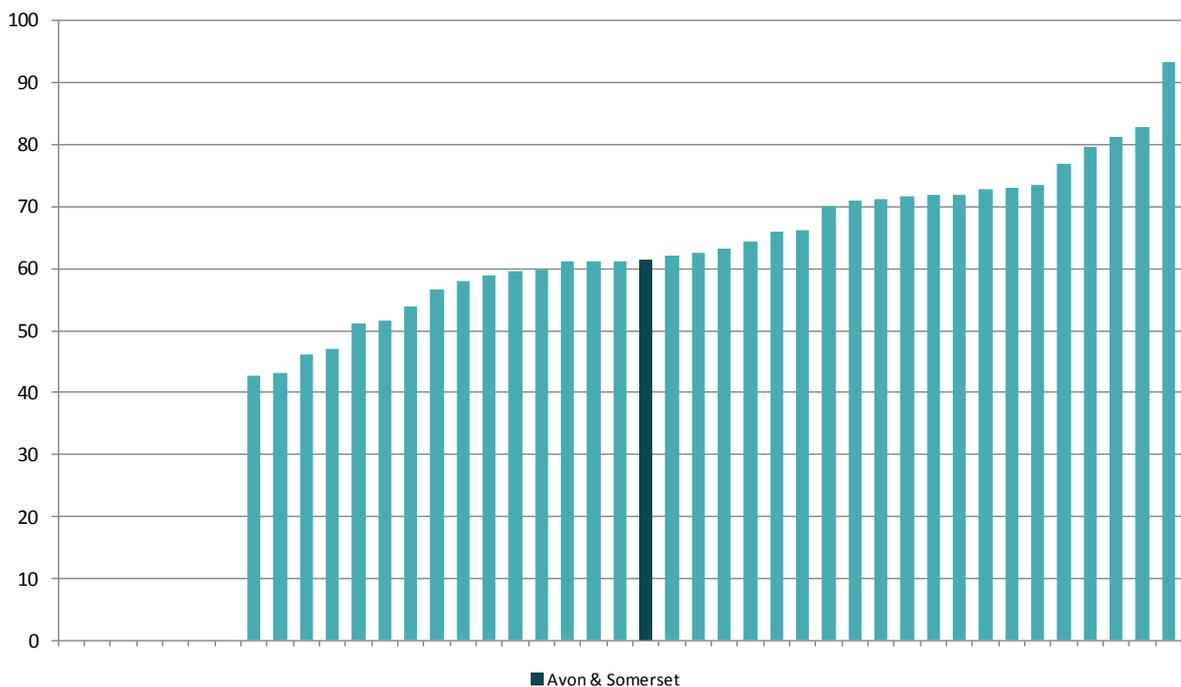
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<sup>9</sup> MARACs (multi-agency risk assessment conferences) – local meetings where information about high-risk domestic abuse victims (those at risk of murder or serious harm) is shared between local agencies.

In the 12 months to 31 March 2015, recorded domestic abuse increased by 19 percent against the previous 12 months and accounted for 10 percent of all police recorded crime. Across England and Wales during the same period there was a 21 percent increase, with domestic abuse accounting for 10 percent of all police recorded crime.

As shown in figure 2, for every 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded Avon and Somerset Constabulary made 61 arrests.

**Figure 2: The number of arrests per 100 domestic abuse crimes by force, for the 12 months to 31 March 2015**

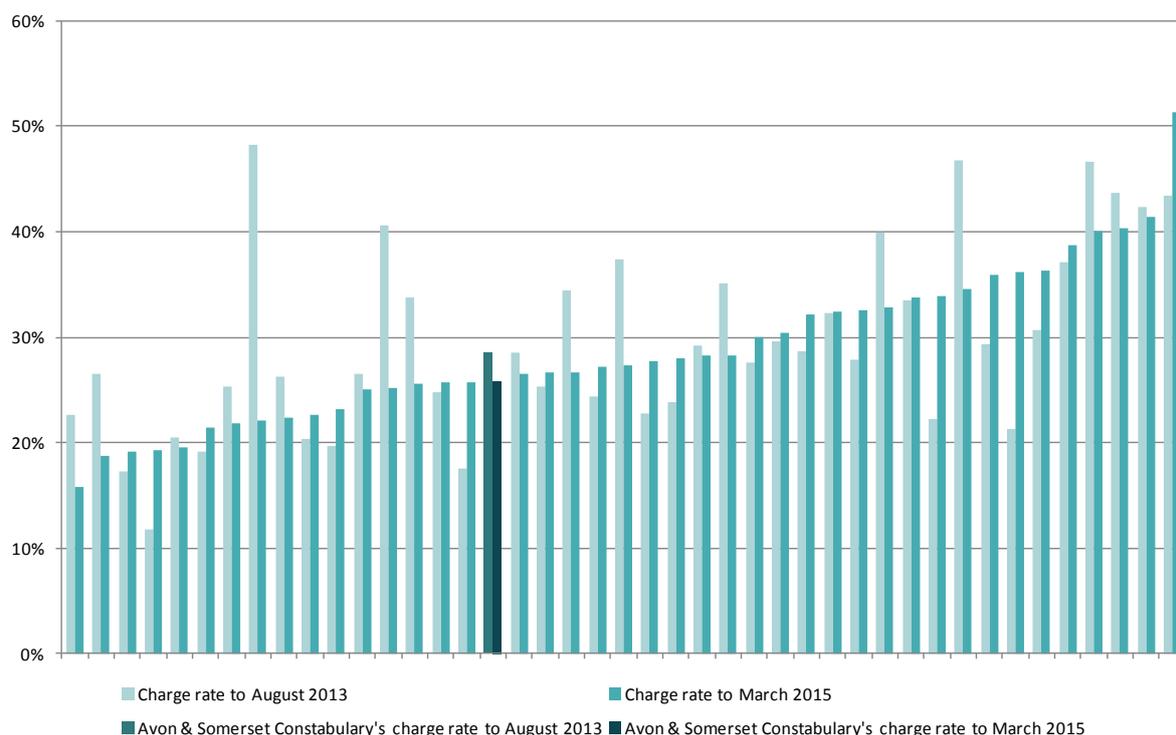


**Source: HMIC data return**

HMIC reviewed 10 domestic abuse files, and found a good standard of investigation centred on the victim. However, there are often inconsistencies in recording details of victim contact and care.

The constabulary’s charge rate for domestic abuse recorded crimes for the 12 months to 31 March 2015 was 26 percent, compared with 27 percent for England and Wales. This is a decrease since the last HMIC domestic abuse inspection when the constabulary rate was 28 percent for the 12 months to 31 August 2013, compared with 30 percent for England and Wales.

**Figure 3: Domestic abuse charge rate for the 12 months to 31 March 2015 compared to the 12 months to 31 August 2013**



**Source: HMIC data return**

HMIC also examined the constabulary's use of new legal powers to protect victims. Domestic violence protection orders (DVPOs) were introduced in England and Wales in 2014 to prevent a suspected offender from returning to a victim's home or contacting the victim. The constabulary began using DVPOs in June 2014; it made 141 applications to magistrates' courts for their use, of which 120 were granted. Seventeen DVPOs have been breached. Breaches occur when the offender fails to comply with the condition of the order and is taken back before the magistrates' court. This represents a DVPO breach rate of 14 percent compared with the England and Wales rate of 17 percent.<sup>10</sup>

HMIC found evidence of a good range of policy and guidance to assist staff with the management of domestic abuse. Similar constabulary guidance is available to staff regarding the obtaining of domestic violence protection notices (DVPNs) and domestic violence protection orders (DVPOs),<sup>11</sup> the effective use of which received favourable comment from partner agency representatives.

<sup>10</sup> The England and Wales figure is based on data provided by 35 forces.

<sup>11</sup> DVPNs (domestic violence prevention notices) may be issued by an authorised police officer to prevent a suspected perpetrator from returning to a victim's home and/or contacting the victim. Following the issue of the DVPN the police must apply to the magistrates for a domestic violence prevention order (DVPO). The DVPO will be granted for a period of up to 28 days.

## Summary of findings



**Requires improvement**

Avon and Somerset Constabulary is prioritising resources to protect vulnerable people. However, there are several areas where improvement is needed to ensure that the service is consistent and that vulnerable people are kept safe. Given the scale of the challenge in this area and the risk that is posed to some of the most vulnerable people overall, the force requires improvement.

HMIC acknowledges that the constabulary has committed significant effort and resource to offer a high quality service to vulnerable people and to support victims.

The constabulary identifies and responds to vulnerable victims effectively. However, declining levels of expertise and high workloads are affecting adversely the effectiveness of some specialist staff and some high-risk domestic abuse investigations are being investigated by non-specialist staff.

The constabulary has improved its response to missing and absent children. However, improvements are required, in particular in relation to the classification of children as absent rather than missing. Strong and developing partnership arrangements are in place to protect vulnerable people either in a multi-agency safeguarding hub or safeguarding coordination units.

The constabulary has invested in resources to tackle child sexual exploitation. A good range of policy and guidance assists staff with the management of domestic abuse but HMIC is concerned at inconsistencies in the recording of information on vulnerable people and risk assessment.

## **Causes of concern**

The constabulary's response to missing and absent children, specifically those at risk of sexual exploitation, is a cause of concern to HMIC. The inspection found a number of cases where the use of this absent classification was inappropriate and potentially exposed the child to risk. We found a lack of understanding and recognition of risk and vulnerability factors among frontline staff. The constabulary has more work to do in relation to the culture of some operational supervisors and in addressing their lack of understanding of the risks that child sexual exploitation poses to persistent missing children.

We saw evidence that some operational staff and supervisors regard children who go missing repeatedly as a distraction from other duties and do not appreciate the need to consider the risk and the necessity to take safeguarding action. While we found evidence of trigger or response plans for some missing and absent cases where there was an identified risk of child sexual exploitation, we are concerned that such plans are rarely up-to-date and are held on local non-networked systems, which means not all staff can access them. In some areas of the constabulary there are delays in the sharing of information with partners.

## **Recommendation**

To address this cause of concern the constabulary should review immediately its approach to reports of missing children and take steps to ensure that:

- frontline staff understand and use appropriately the 'missing' and 'absent' categories, and understand the factors that escalate the risk of harm to children;
- frontline staff have the necessary knowledge to identify risk factors associated with child sexual exploitation and how to respond to such cases;
- supervisors provide the correct oversight of missing person enquiries and make appropriate decisions in accordance with the risk assessment; and
- the response to persistent and repeat missing children is improved through the effective use of information from previous missing episodes to develop co-ordinated and prioritised responses, which includes the sharing of relevant information with partners in a timely manner.

## **Causes of concern**

The constabulary's response to victims of domestic abuse is a cause of concern to HMIC. Discretionary use of formal DASH risk assessments increases the chance that the constabulary will provide victims with inconsistent levels of support and safeguarding. The variance in domestic abuse risk assessments also presents challenges for Lighthouse staff in applying consistency and proportionality to common needs assessments for vulnerable victims.

We found that investigation and safeguarding plans are recorded on the force systems inconsistently. In addition, we found limited evidence of effective supervision of investigations. Some domestic abuse investigations, including those assessed as high risk, are allocated to non-specialist staff. A new influx of supervisors into specialist roles, many without previous specialist experience, has left investigative and safeguarding staff with limited opportunities for advice and direction. It is more likely that decisions on risk and safeguarding are being taken by staff with lower levels of training or experience. A backlog in training and development courses compounds the issue.

## **Recommendation**

To address this cause of concern HMIC recommends that the constabulary should take immediate steps to ensure that:

- staff understand clearly when they should complete a DASH risk assessment, with that effective supervision ensuring consistency; and
- sufficient officers and staff with the appropriate professional skills and expertise carry out and supervise investigations and safeguarding activity.

### **Areas for improvement**

The constabulary should improve its initial assessment of risk to vulnerable people by ensuring staff who work at front counters of police stations are appropriately trained and have access to processes to identify and assess risk and vulnerability.

The constabulary should improve its protection of vulnerable adults and children by ensuring the safeguarding coordination units share information and agree safeguarding action with partners in an effective and timely manner. This is specifically in relation to the attendance of officers at strategy meetings and the use of achieving best evidence interviews.

The constabulary should ensure that it complies with its duties under the code of practice for victims of crime, specifically in relation to victim personal statements.

The constabulary should improve its safeguarding of children by reviewing whether it requires a consistent process through which a child identified as being at risk could be referred to the MASH or SCU to allow the force to assess and consider what further action is required.